

# Aba East Conference

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OBIOMA AGHARANYA

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Aba East Conference was formerly known as East Nigeria Conference and is part of the Eastern Nigeria Union Conference in West-Central Africa Division.<sup>1</sup>

Aba East Conference covers parts of Aba North local government area which includes 23 square kilometers, parts of Aba South local government area which includes 49 square kilometers, and the whole of Obi Ngwa local government area which includes 395 square kilometers in Abia state of Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> The conference headquarters is situated at 1 New Umuahia Road, Ogbor Hill, Aba, Abia state, Nigeria. Mailing Address is Private Mail Bag 7115, Aba, Abia state of Nigeria.<sup>3</sup>

Aba East Conference covers a territory with a population of 1,789,780. It has 95 churches and membership of 23,961.<sup>4</sup>

## The Beginning of Seventh-day Adventist Work

In April 1923, Pastor Jersey Clifford of England began work in Aba, in eastern Nigeria, having already served in Sierra Leone and Ghana.<sup>5</sup> He and his wife worked for the Nigeria Union which had its headquarters in Ibadan, Nigeria. Jersey Clifford held Sabbath School every Sabbath with some old believers from Sierra Leone with whom he was connected in Aba. He and his wife visited people and gained their interest through Bible studies and the distribution of tracts.<sup>6</sup> Thus they established the work at Aba which also became the headquarters of the church in eastern Nigeria.<sup>7</sup> The Cliffords chose to establish a mission in Aba because it was a large market town, having good roads within and roads leading to other towns, a railway station and postal service.<sup>8</sup>

## Jersey Clifford's Itinerary in Niger Delta

On their arrival in Aba, they visited a number of towns in the Niger Delta. The journey took ten days, first by motor road to Owerri, then by foot to Omoku, Obagi, Ahoada, Abua, and by canoe to Port Harcourt. According to Jesse Clifford, it was the rainy season and the River Niger was in full flood. "Many times the path was lost in miles of swamp and flood water but the carriers (porters) with their bare feet had a wonderful way of finding the winding path, never did we miss our way."<sup>9</sup>

After Pastor Clifford and his wife arrived in Aba in April 1923, they had to wait for about six months before they could move into their newly built bush house on the mission land. Their first place of worship was at the house of Mr. Labour, an herbalist from Sierra Leone. They first lived in Qua Iboe Mission station with an English missionary named O’Niel, who was working with Qua Iboe Church, at Ogbor Hill in Aba.<sup>10</sup> Their first house was built of mud, with a mud floor and a roof of corrugated iron, with no protection from the heat. However, kind neighbors soon gave them a couple of rooms in a thatch-roofed house, which was much cooler.

Pastor Clifford later acquired a piece of land at Umuola Egbelu in Aba on which to build a church and a house in which to live. The land was acquired from Chief Wogu of Umuola Egbelu. Their first home on this newly acquired land cost £20. The walls were constructed by putting ten-foot poles in rows, leaving spaces for doors and windows, tying the poles together with creepers and filling in the spaces with mud. The mud was then rubbed smooth on both sides and white-washed when dry. The floor was made of a thin layer of concrete. The house was thatch-roofed. Their first church was built in the same way and was able to accommodate 40 people. This was soon filled and overflowing and the passing years revealed the need for a larger church building.<sup>11</sup>

## The First Mud House Church and the First Native Sabbath Keepers

In preparation for the first Sabbath services in the first mud church house, Pastor Clifford and his wife wrote advertisements and pinned them on trees in the area, welcoming all to attend the Sabbath services, morning and afternoon, in their newly built church. They prayed earnestly that many would attend. The Lord answered their prayer. On the first Sabbath the church was fully packed. They prayed again for the second Sabbath worship and 14 people came. These became the nucleus of the future church. The Cliffords learned their names and their villages after the service and they began visiting them during the week to teach them more from the Word of God.<sup>12</sup>

Among the first natives to keep the Sabbath were Josiah Evoh, Daniel Onyeodor, Robert Abaribe, and Philip Onwere. They were standard six pupils from the Aba Government School. They were convinced by means of tracts about the Sabbath given them by C. H. Dede of Aba Government School, who had been reached by Pastor Clifford’s personal efforts.

## Early Evangelistic Efforts

Pastor Clifford personally visited individuals and villages, distributed tracts, and publicly presented messages illustrated with pictures and a projector. These methods created interests and converts were made. Those who first received the message spread the news to their brothers, sisters, friends, and households, thus increasing interest in the towns and villages.<sup>13</sup>

Before the arrival of the Cliffords, other missionaries from other denominations had earlier established missions in Aba and other areas in eastern Nigeria. Pastor Clifford and his team had to contend with opposition from these missionaries who felt their work was seriously threatened by the biblical messages proclaimed by the Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>14</sup>

The first churches, apart from the Aba headquarters church, were begun in Obete, Umuocha, Umuobiakwa, and Umuakpara villages around Aba. Representatives from these various churches would come to Aba weekly to study Sabbath School lessons, Bible doctrines, and an outline of the books of the Bible. These lessons were taught by Pastor Clifford. They also made plans for evangelism. These classes helped to solidify the missionary work.<sup>15</sup> The first baptism took place in 1923 when B. I. Tikili and two others were baptized. In 1924 more believers, including Philip Onwere, were baptized.<sup>16</sup>

## The First Schools

The following is an account of the first schools and educational development in eastern Nigeria by the Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>17</sup>

In 1923, Pastor Clifford started the first Bible class at Aba, assisted by his wife and Daniel Onyeodor, a native convert. By 1927 the school had become known as a center for formal education. The earliest pupils were Nelson Hemuka, Wilson Uzuegbu, Sunday Ubani-Ukoma, Robert Nnadede, James Nwambu, Abraham Nzotta, and Adonijah Cookey. The first headmaster was B. I. Tikili, while Daniel Onyeodor, Robert Abaribe, Philip Onwere, and Robert Nwosu were among the earliest student teachers. In 1931 the first products of this first Adventist primary school in eastern Nigeria were registered for the "First School Leaving Certificate" examination conducted by the Ministry of Education in Nigeria. In 1936, a Seventh-day Adventist Girls' Primary School was opened at Aba to meet the necessity of educating women. It was opened by Ruth Reith from England, assisted by Lissy Ene, a Nigerian. In 1950, the Girls' Primary School was moved to Ihie, the college site. The college itself was moved from Ibadan in western Nigeria to Ihie in eastern Nigeria in 1948 and its name was changed from Seventh-day Adventist Training College to Nigerian Training College. This college was opened in the early 1930s at Oke Bola in Ibadan. The training college was necessary for training Adventist teachers for the church schools.<sup>18</sup>

In 1952 the Preliminary Training Course (PTC) was established at Aba when the Seventh-day Adventist Girls' School was moved to Ihie. The PTC was to offer preliminary training for Adventist students who wanted a career as teachers.<sup>19</sup>

In 1953 the Adventist High School, the first SDA secondary grammar school in eastern Nigeria, was opened at Ihie, with 28 students, 19 of whom were Adventists among whom were three girls. The first principal of the school was Wilfred G. A. Fitcher, an Englishman, assisted by Young Dike, a native. In the same year the Training College also became coeducational. This experiment of training boys and girls in the same classes was

successful. The secondary school was a medium of introducing many young people of other churches in eastern Nigeria to the Adventist faith. Between 1953 and 1970, 401 students passed through the secondary school. Among these, 209 boys and 31 girls were Adventist, while 128 boys and 35 girls were not Adventist.<sup>20</sup>

In 1955, M. A. Moses became the first national to obtain a bachelor's degree when he received a B.A. degree in economics from Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone, under the West Africa Union Mission's bursary loan scholarship program.

In 1970, at the end of the Nigerian Civil War, the government of the East Central State of Nigeria took control of all schools within its territory. These included all the Adventist schools from primary to secondary. The government takeover, in a way, helped absorb the overflow of teachers trained in the training college who could not be employed in the Adventist primary schools because of lack of space for them. However, beginning in the late 1980s, many Adventist churches began to establish nursery and primary schools which are still in operation.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the progress made, there was need for the introduction of vocational and technical training for Adventist youth in a country of fast population growth with slim chances of employment and difficulty finding jobs that do not require work on Sabbath.

## Adventist Secondary Technical College Owerrinta

Adventist Secondary Technical College (ASTECC), Owerrinta, in Abia state of Nigeria was established in 1993 by the East Nigeria Conference, with a mission to provide young people with the best secondary level education that would develop their mental, spiritual, physical, and social powers to meet the challenges of higher education and self-reliance in this world and prepare them for the world to come. D. O. Arungwa was the first principal of ASTECC. With the last reorganization of the East Nigeria Conference in 2013, ASTECC Owerrinta automatically became a school in the Aba North Conference.<sup>22</sup>

## Adventist Technical High School (ATHIS) Aba

In September 2014, a secondary school with the name Adventist Technical High School was opened at Aba by the Aba East Conference under the administration of Pastor Joel N. Ubani, president; Pastor Vine C. Nwosu, secretary; and Elder Felix M. Nwaogu, treasurer. It is located across from the conference secretariat. Pastor Obioma Agharanya was the first principal of the school (September 2014-December 2016). The school is a center for evangelism and nurture for all students as it caters to their spiritual needs. It is also a center for academic, technical, and vocational training of students.<sup>23</sup>

## The Beginning and Progress of the Medical Work

## The Ahoada County Hospital

The first medical institution operated by the East Nigeria Mission of Seventh-day Adventists was the 60-bed Ahoada County Hospital, opened in 1957.<sup>24</sup> Ahoada was a major mission station and was situated in the area that later became Rivers state. Dr. DeShay was in charge of the hospital before the Nigerian civil war and after. He left in June 1972 when the Rivers state government took over the hospital. Although the former senior medical staff of the hospital was asked to continue, the majority of them refused the offer because of uncertainty about Sabbath-keeping privileges.

## Northern Ngwa County Hospital

The agreement to open a mission hospital at Okpualangwa, about 20 miles from Aba, was signed on June 10, 1963, between the mission and the Northern Ngwa County Council. The signatories included Chief Stephen Akwada Ahuchogu (chair, Northern Ngwa County Council) and T. J. Karkkainem (treasurer, SDA Church, Aba). Dr. S. A. Nagel Jr. was the administrator of the hospital. The hospital functioned during the Nigerian civil war with the help of Adventist doctors from the United States. However, in December 1969 when Okpualangwa fell to Federal troops, the hospital was moved to Emii, Owerri, where it continued to function as a humanitarian service center until the end of the war. In March 1970, a skeletal number of the hospital staff returned to Okpualangwa, but without a medical doctor. The hospital remained dormant as it could not be staffed by the church until November 1972 when it was reopened by Dr. Magnus Adiele, the East Central State Commissioner of Health, as a community hospital run by the government.<sup>25</sup>

## Seventh-Day Adventist Hospital Aba (Aba Health Center) and Motherless Babies Home

The mission remained without a health and humanitarian facility until 1978, a year after it was inaugurated as a conference, when it made efforts to establish a Motherless Babies Home at Aba. The first baby in the home was taken care of by Comfort Ohiagu. The establishment of the Motherless Babies Home was pioneered by Pastor Hope I. C. Oriaku. The presence of the Motherless Babies Home led to the building of a health center at the same location.<sup>26</sup>

The Seventh-day Adventist Hospital Aba was opened with the name Aba Health Centre. It began as a 50-bed facility dedicated on March 25, 1984.<sup>27</sup> After the center was dedicated, it took over the administration of the babies' home. The first medical director of the center was E. N. Nzotta (1984); followed by N. P. Mosqueda (1985–1990); and E. E. Enyinna.<sup>28</sup>

## The Beginning of the Publishing Work

Literature evangelism was started in 1925 when R. O. Wosu and others started selling the publications of the church under the missionary service system, with little commission to help them pay their school fees. In 1932, Elder J. J. Strahle organized the colporteur work in the East Nigerian Mission. Later A. W. Cook was the Publishing Department secretary. Among the literature evangelists then were Albert J. Dickay, Albert A. Nnata, Frank Ihuoma, Monday Nwogwugwu (Atughonu), Nelson Onwubere, Matthew Worisa, Napoleon Anaba, Luke Ogiriga, Green Dickay, David Izima, and Wilson Ngaramara. In 1935, when A. W. Cook left, A. J. Dike was appointed the Publishing Department secretary, becoming the first native from eastern Nigeria to hold the post.<sup>29</sup>

## Crises Faced by the Growing Church

The Church studied in the Sabbath School lesson for the first quarter of 1938, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.<sup>30</sup> The brethren believed that the latter rain would come. Then came what was seen as a spirit movement in July and August of 1938. Some members claimed to see visions and dreams and have manifestations of signs. Many claimed the power to heal the sick and raise the dead, make the lame to walk, the blind to see, and the dumb to speak. Some spoke in many tongues. Some prophesied. Some confessed their sins openly and were flogged as a sign of forgiveness. A man who claimed to have the power to raise the dead, even tried to exercise that power over a particular dead man, but could not succeed after several hours of effort. Another man climbed up to the top of Aba water tank from where he was calling God to come and take him to heaven. This tank was so high that the police could only go up half way and encourage him with a long pole to hurry down.<sup>31</sup>

This spirit movement was seen as Satan's counterfeit. It appeared that every district of the church around Aba was affected as members were influenced. The church was ridiculed before the public. Nevertheless, when Elder Bartlett from England attended the church workers' meeting in August 1938, he gave a lecture stressing the need to "Try the spirits whether they are of God." This lecture diminished the movement. However a notable national minister, Pastor B. I. Tikili, who believed in the movement, resigned and established his own church (Seventh-day Church of God), drawing away some members.<sup>32</sup>

Nigeria experienced a civil war between 1967 and 1970. The area known as the Eastern Region of Nigeria was mainly the territory covered by the East Nigerian Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This was the area declared as "Biafra"—a secessionist country out of Nigeria. It was also the area where the war was fought. The Nigerian army came into Biafra to bring the people back. The war havoc truncated the growth and movement of the church. Many lives and properties of the members were destroyed. Two pastors lost their lives—Pastor J. N. Imebuogu in 1967, and Pastor A. D. Adiele and his wife in 1968. As many as 800 members died during the war, mostly from hunger and sickness. Only one quarter of one percent died as a result of being hit by bullets or bombs.<sup>33</sup>

The war affected the headquarters of the work at Aba. When the fall of Aba was imminent, the mission president, Pastor Z. N. Imo, evacuated the offices before it fell on September 4, 1968. From Aba the headquarters moved to Umuocha. From Umuocha it moved to Ihie where it operated in booths for more than a year. Within the period at Ihie, it operated for two and a half months at Umuahia. On December 23, 1969, the headquarters was moved to Amaumara in Mbaise. It was later moved to Umueze in Mbano where it remained until the end of the war on January 12, 1970. The headquarters was moved back to Aba on February 4, 1970, and was operated temporarily at No. 18 Constitution Crescent until September when it was moved back to the original location after it had been repaired.

During the war church services were held in booths, bushes, and refugee camps. The worship services included Seventh-day Adventists, people of other denominations, heathens, and infidels. There could be no camp meetings, as large gatherings were forbidden. Despite the difficulties and horrors of the war, faithful members saw the war as a reason to engage in lay evangelism, and baptisms were conducted that included even soldiers.

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## Organizational History of the Conference

Aba East Conference, formerly known as East Nigeria Conference, was established in 1923; organized in 1930; reorganized several times, in 1971, 1977, 1986, 2003; reorganized again and renamed in 2013. The following conferences were carved out of the former East Nigeria Conference: former Rivers Conference (1971), former South East Conference (1980), former East Central Conference (1986), and former Anambra Imo Conference (2003), Aba South Conference (2013), and Aba North Conference (2013).<sup>35</sup>

Established in 1923, the East Nigeria Mission Field was organized in 1930. The field was reorganized in 1971 and in 1977, when it became the first conference in Nigeria. The conference was reorganized again in 2013 when it was renamed as Aba East Conference. In 2013, following the latest reorganization, the name was changed from East Nigeria Conference to Aba East Conference. Aba East Conference is located in eastern Nigeria with the same headquarters still at the same place in Aba (where J. Clifford established the work in 1923) after many conferences and missions have been carved out through the years of growth and processes of reorganization.

## List of Presidents

J. Clifford (1923-1930);<sup>36</sup> L. Edmunds (1930-1944); B. A. Walton (1945-1949); W. J. Newman (1950-1956); A. J. Dickay<sup>37</sup> (1957-1961); P. E. Onwere (1962-1965); Z. N. Imo (1966-1977); I. Nwaobia (1978-1986); F. O. Ubani (1986-1987); J. O. Achilihu (1988-1996); G. C. Nwaogwugwu (1997-2005); K. C. Anonaba (2006-2010); M. C. Njoku (2011-2012); J. N. Ubani 2013-present )<sup>38</sup>

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## NOTES

1. "Aba East Conference," *2016 Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, accessed May 12, 2019, <https://adventistyearbook.org/2016.pdf>
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. "Aba East Conference," *2017 Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, accessed May 12, 2019, <https://adventistyearbook.org/2017.pdf>
5. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, vol. 11, (1996), 181.
6. D. Izima, (ed), *A Brief History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastern States of Nigeria* (Aba: Maranatha Printing Press, 1973), 11.
7. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, vol. 11, (1996), 182.
8. M. C. Njoku, *A History of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Igbo land (1923-2010)*, A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, Faculty of the Social Sciences (University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2014), 55.
9. D. Izima, *A Brief History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastern States of Nigeria* (Aba: Maranatha Printing Press (1973), 43.

10. A. Ochulor, "*The Missionary Enterprise of the Seventh-day Adventist Mission in Ngwa Land: 1910-1960*," (unpublished undergraduate paper) (University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 1979), 18, quoted in Njoku, 55.
11. Izima, 44.
12. Ibid., 42.
13. Ibid., 11.
14. Ibid., 3.
15. Ibid., 11, 42-43.
16. Ibid., 12.
17. Ibid., 14-21.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid. See also Adventist Secondary Technical College, Owerrinta, website [www.astecsdaowerrinta.com/](http://www.astecsdaowerrinta.com/).
23. Izima, 44. See also Adventist Technical High School Aba website <http://www.athisaba.com/about.html>.
24. Ibid., 33.
25. Ibid., 33-34.
26. Njoku, 62.
27. "Aba Health Centre," *The Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002).
28. Njoku, 62.
29. Izima, 26-28.

30. Ibid., 23-24.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 36-39.

34. Ibid.

35. "Aba East Conference," *2017 Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, accessed May 12, 2019, <https://adventistyearbook.org/2017.pdf>

36. As the pioneer missionary, Pastor Clifford was the leader of the work in east Nigeria beginning in 1923. However, east Nigeria became an organized mission field in 1930.

37. A. J. Dickay became the first indigenous president of the field.

38. "Aba East Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*.

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